

# JOSEPH O'HALLORAN, S. J.

**T**he few historians who have interested themselves in the life of Joseph Ignatious O'Halloran have given different birth dates for this illustrious brother of the great surgeon and historian, Sylvester O'Halloran. The dates vary between 1718 and 1728; Dr. J.B Lyons, the acknowledged authority on the O'Halloran family, gives the date as 19 March, 1720, while the historian and fellow-Jesuit, Francis Finegan, sets out the date as 24 March, 1718.

The exact date of his birth is of little importance now, but we must be thankful to those, especially his contemporaries, for recording some aspects of his career. He was born in the North Liberties of Limerick, in the townland of Caherdavin, in the old parish of Kileely. His father, Michael O'Halloran, was a farmer and a Catholic, whose substantial circumstances remain a cause for wonder. How he was able to survive and educate his sons in an exclusive local school and afterwards in Continental Universities, while labouring under the crippling weight of the draconian Penal Laws, has never been explained.

Joseph got his elementary education in the well known school of the Rev. Robert Cashin, a Protestant clergyman, who has been given less credit by Limerick historians than he deserved. The Rev. Cashin was afterwards to prepare his brother, Sylvester, for the career that was to bring him fame. While Sylvester was originally intended for the priesthood, Joseph was groomed for medicine, and began his medical studies in Bordeaux, in 1736, where his brother

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was later to set out on his long and rewarding life's work. Joseph decided to dedicate himself to the spiritual welfare of humanity rather than to the care of their mortal bodies; Sylvester was to take up this latter task in a manner that was to establish him as a genius in the medical and surgical world.

When Joseph had successfully completed his studies in philosophy, he decided to become a member of the Society of Jesus and enrolled in the novitiate in Bordeaux. He completed a brilliant course, passing every examination with highest honours, and was rewarded with the appointment of professor of philosophy at the university.

His outstanding personal courage was demonstrated when he became one of the first clerics on the Continent to accept the philosophical theories of Isaac Newton, when it was more acceptable and patriotic to accept those of the Frenchman, Descartes. This was a time when the shade of Galileo was hovering over every Catholic student of philosophy and theology, and when the revolutionary theories of scientists were approached by the Catholic Church in much the same way that an explosives expert would approach an unexploded bomb.

When it became all but impossible to remain in France, owing to the severe religious persecution, Father O'Halloran returned to Ireland, accompanied by his great friend and colleague, Dr. Butler, (Lord Dunboyne), and settled in Cork,

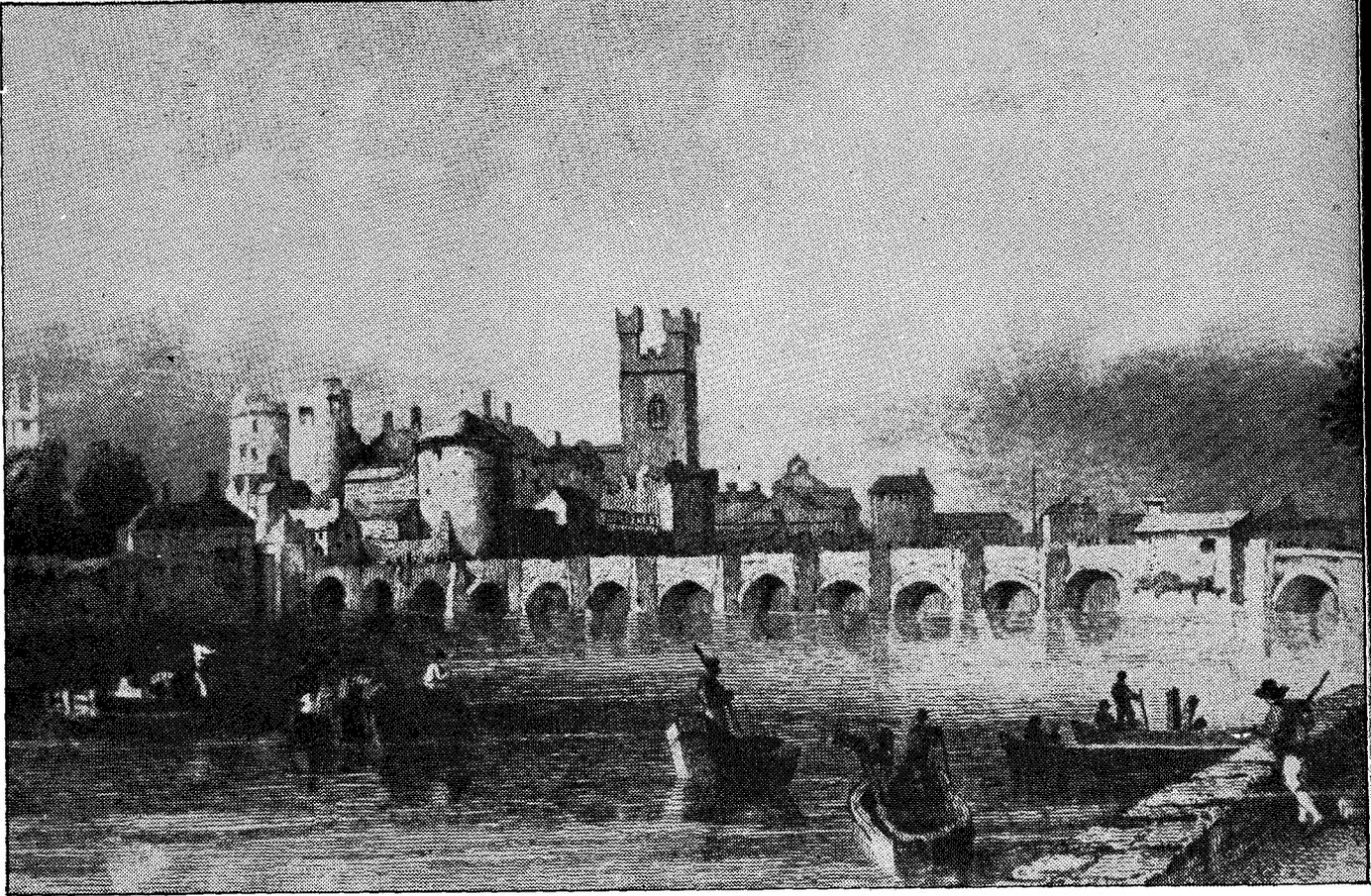
where he spent many years attached to the North Chapel. While there, he was noted as an exceptional preacher, and it is recorded that thousands flocked from outlying areas to hear his sermons. This was a genuine tribute to the Jesuit, as sermons from the pulpit were usually accepted as a penance, and offered up as an atonement for sin, that is, if one could keep awake during the usual turgid monotone.

In his yet unpublished manuscript which he generously made available to me, Fr. Francis Finegan has written:

*After his noviceship, he went for his regency to La Rochelle. In 1745, he entered on his theological course at the Grand College, Poitiers, where he was ordained as a priest in 1748/9. On the completion of his studies, he returned to Bordeaux, where he was professor of philosophy for the next seven years or so but was then transferred to La Rochelle to become professor of dogmatic theology. He was at La Rochelle at the dissolution of the Society in France, but seems to have returned to Ireland around 1763. He was stationed at Cork for the next decade until the suppression of the Society. At Cork, he laboured in the chapel of St. Mary with his colleague of the residence, Father Patrick Doran. Some two years after his arrival in Cork, on 29th. March, 1765, a bill of indictment was found by the Grand Jury against 'Joseph Halloran, Popish priest and Jesuit, (who was the person who had the daring insolence, together with the titular Bishop, publicly in a Popish chapel near Shandon Church to set at defiance the laws of the Realm by reflecting on and attempting to overthrow the fundamentals of the*



The port of Bordeaux.



Old Thomond Bridge, close to the birthplace of Joseph O'Halloran.

Established Church and in contempt of the indulgence given to Papists by our mild and generous government for endeavouring to pervert some of his Majesty's Protestant subjects, and persuading them to embrace the erroneous doctrines of Popery'. The results of the trial have not come down to us. It is quite possible that if the case had ever come into court, it would have had to be dismissed on the grounds that a ceremony of the Catholic religion within doors could not have been regarded as a public occasion. Seven years later, on 18th February, 1771, Father O'Halloran was reported as engaging in a similar dialogue: 'A gentleman of the tribe of Loyola, agreed with his Bishop to have public disputations on the consistency of the two religions. The Jesuit undertook to support the Protestants - the bishop Popery. This controversy was carried on many days at the chapel, to the entire refutation of the Protestant divine. The audience testified their joy by repeated shouts for this defeat, by the strong arguments of his Lordship (as he is styled among them). This public insult to the laws, though known to every person in the town, did not raise a champion to assist the good natured Jesuit, either amongst our magistrates or clergy. Alas! they were employed in their departments, in sharing the loaves and fishes. However, a champion at length

appeared! - an honest cooper, with more zeal than wit, objected to some tenets urged by the Bishop, to his great confusion and dismay. Thus ended the farce; but the poor cooper paid dearly for his temerity. A party was made against him, who have since driven him to beggary and ruin.'

Father O'Halloran, during his ten years in Cork, was not only a notable preacher but a catechist devoted to the task of imparting to the children a grasp of Catholic belief and conduct. He laboured in the city until the suppression of 1773, when he joined his religious colleagues in Dublin, and signed with them, on February 4th, 1774, their formal acceptance of the brief of suppression.

The personality of Joseph O'Halloran captured the attention of no less a celebrity than Thomas Moore, in a tribute 'Apostrophe to the Shade of Father O'Halloran' in his book *Travels of an Irish Gentleman in Search of a Religion*:

*I used to set off early in the morning, trembling all over at the task that was before me (going to confession), but finally resolved to tell the worst. How vividly do I, even at this moment, remember kneeling down at the confessional, and feeling my heart-beats quicken as the sliding panel in the side opened and I saw the meek and venerable form of Father O'Halloran stooping to hear my whispered list of sins. The*

*paternal look of the old man, the gentleness of his voice, even in rebuke, the encouraging hopes he gave of mercy as the sure reward of contrition and reformation, all these recollections came freshly over my mind. Shade of my reverend pastor! could thou have looked down on me in the midst of my follies, how it would have grieved thy meek spirit to see the humble little visitor of thy confessional, him whom thou hast doomed for his sins to read the seven Penitential Psalms every day, to see him forgetting so soon the docility of those undoubting days and setting himself up, God help him, as a controvertist and Protestant.*

Fr. O'Halloran died in Dublin in 1800, and was buried in St. Michan's churchyard only two years after the mutilated bodies of the Sheares brothers were laid in the crypt there.

#### SOURCES

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